

THE DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS
WEEK 4: RESPONDING TO DESOLATION

While Rules 5-9 give guidance to one who is in a state of desolation, they do not only help one who is in a complete state of desolation. They also give guidance in those moments when one is experiencing a desolating moment or emotion. In this way, we are guided in how to respond to individual desolations in ways that help one to more clearly and confidently identify the presence and movements of the Spirit.

IDENTIFYING CONSOLATIONS AND DESOLATIONS

Before moving into how one responds to desolating times and spirits, it is helpful to look at other ways of recognizing and identifying desolations and consolations. In this way, if we are looking for the signs of the presence of the Spirit, then one can look for the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Sacred Scripture has given us a revealed list of these fruits. Whenever one sees these fruits present, or their effects, this is a consolation. One may feel a strong sense of love or charity toward an individual, or be tempted toward an act of charity; these feelings and temptations are natural responses and signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, their opposites would be desolations and signs of the presence of evil spirits.

Fruits of the Holy Spirit and Countering Spirits		
Charity/Selfishness	Joy/Despair	Peace/Unsettledness
Patience/Impatience	Kindness/Meanness	Goodness/Miserliness
Longanimity/Flighty	Mildness/Intolerance	Faith/Anxiousness
Modesty/Immodesty	Continenence/Intemperate	Chastity/Lust

PRINCIPLE ATTITUDES AND RESPONSES TO DESOLATION

Moving away from desolation

Effects of Desolation (Primarily from Diadochus)

Desolating emotions have the effect of clouding one's vision so that it is difficult to see the presence of consolations and movements of the Spirit.

The experience of desolation reduces one's ability to act in virtue (e.g. when we are sick

Strong attraction to things of physical beauty creates a veil over seeing spiritual goods

Desolations of the mind (anger, worries, etc.) cause ripples of the soul which, until calmed, prevent one's vision from being clear.

There are times when one is particularly prone to confuse desolation and consolations:

During the period near sleep, either before or after; during light sleep or passing into the state of sleep

During times of illness and extreme worry

During times of intense worry and worldly concern

RULE 5: IN MOMENTS OF DESOLATION, DO NOT MAKE CHANGES

When one is in a time of desolation, or experiencing an intense number of desolating spirits, do not make any significant changes, but rely on the foundations of virtue and holiness that have already been established.

In a practical way, this amounts to one being guided by habits, routines and the teachings that one has already learned. It is also like an athlete who approaches a moment of high anxiety or pressure and focuses on the hours and routines developed during practice.

RULE 6: RESPOND TO DESOLATION BY INSISTING MORE ON PRAYER, MEDITATION, EXAMINATION AND SUITABLE PENANCE

While one should not move to make any significant changes during times of desolation, one does not simply stop all activity or just continue doing things as they have always been done. There are frequently times when one has to take an action of some sort and other times when the Spirit is using the desolation to draw a soul closer to Him.

For example, if one is facing a legal issue and is contemplating seeking a new lawyer, it can happen that whenever one begins thinking about the question his mind never seems to be at rest over the issue, and is thrown into a spiraling state of worry or doubt. In these moments one can fight the desolating spirits by turning to holy things: saying the Jesus prayer is helpful; being more insistent on times for Adoration or quiet meditation to focus on something like the Passion of Christ. By focusing the gaze toward the Spirit, one creates an environment that is receptive to His guidance and lead. We can also equate this to being in a concert hall while one is attempting to talk on the phone and leaving the hall with all of its noise for a place of quiet.

RULE 7: TAKE CONFIDENCE IN THE ACTIVITY AND PRESENCE OF THE SPIRIT

When facing desolation turn the mind toward the question: How is God leading me in this moment?

Often times we can become consumed by questions as to how something could be God's Will, looking further into the future, or even doubt that He is present in particular moments. The Spirit, however, never abandons one and has a Will for every moment.

One is never called to desolation and sin. Even if one cannot see the right path or right way to move forward, simply by avoiding and denying sin or acts that cause desolation in others, one takes action in unison with the Spirit and accomplishes a significant Good. Being left in a state of desolation, which at times is the desire and work of the Spirit, one should never seek it out. In this case, by simply waiting and holding one's ground, if it is a Divine desolation, then one remains ready to respond and receive whatever gifts the Spirit is desiring to give.

When one is unable to recognize the movements of the Spirit or consolations that will lead one to the Spirit, wait patiently. This means that when in doubt of the presence of the Spirit, one should do nothing, remembering of course to rely on the foundation of holy habits, prayers and teachings that one already possesses. It is far better to fail to act than to act in being deceived by the evil spirits.

Turn to the commands, knowledge of God, virtues and prayer. These kinds of desolation can be:

Feelings are not present

An intellectual solution is not present

Unable to accomplish what is need or being asked

RULE 8: HOW TO PERSEVERE IN TIMES OF DESOLATION

There are not only times that we call Spiritual Desolation, but there can be certain areas of our life or relationships that seem to be in an unending desolation, such as a friend or family member that has long cut themselves off from us. In these instances one perseveres in patience, trusting in the faith that the Holy Spirit continues to be at work and will be clear when we are to take action.

Wait for signs of consolation and listen more intently for God's voice.

It is also helpful to remind oneself, as St. Teresa of Jesus herself came to realize after many years in the monastery, that consolations are a free gift of the God to the soul; there is nothing that the soul can do to either earn or win the prize of consolation. Therefore the lack of consolation is not a cause for despair or evidence as some great sin, which the soul will be tempted to believe and evil spirits will try to convince one of these things. Rather, since it is a gift, we are, as St. Teresa of the Child Jesus illustrates for us, hold out our hands like a small child, ready to receive the outpouring of whatever our Father desires to give us.

RULE 9: WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF DESOLATION

Once one has become more aware and attuned at identifying desolations, and how to respond to them, the next step in progressing spiritually requires an understanding of the causes of desolation. One way of looking at this may be to think of an athlete who is going through a period of a significant slump and failure. Ignatius identifies three key causes that one can discern:

One has been tepid, slothful or negligent in one's own spiritual practices. This would be akin to a baseball player who, because he has found great success, no longer sees the need to practice. If we stop spending time with God or practicing the virtues, we can not only forget the taste of God, but the increase in desolation is a natural effect of separation.

Through Divine Desolation, one is both strengthened as steel is tried in the furnace, and better able to see one's own weaknesses more clearly.

In desolation we can better recognize our dependence on God and that all consolations are a gift of the Grace of God.